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EXCISE

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I am replying on behalf of Secretary Shultz to your February 15 letter to Secretary of Commerce Baldrige regarding the travel of official Soviet personnel to Houston, which was referred to the State Department for reply.

In 1941 the Soviet Government instituted strict controls on the travel of all foreigners resident in the USSR, including American diplomats in Moscow. The U.S. attempted over the next ten years to convince the Soviets that it was not in the interest of either side to maintain these controls. When these attempts proved futile, the U.S. reluctantly and on a reciprocal basis imposed its own travel controls on Soviet diplomats in 1951. In 1955 the system was refined by "closing" a number of areas in the United States to travel by Soviet citizens assigned permanently to posts in the United States.

Over the years, the Soviet authorities have decreased the area officially closed to Americans. However, they have also refined their procedures for obstructing travel to nominally open areas. We continue to press the Soviets to reduce or abolish travel controls on a mutual basis.

In 1978, the Soviet Union reduced the percentage of Soviet territory closed to foreigners. On November 16, 1983, the U.S. responded by similarly reducing the percentage of U.S. territory closed to Soviets from 24 to 20 percent. Significant new areas were opened up to Soviet official personnel which had previously been closed. For example, the number of U.S. cities with a population over 100,000 that were closed to Soviet travel was reduced by one-third. Some cities and areas, including Houston, which had previously been open were closed. However, the Soviets can now fly directly to New Orleans (also a major grain port), to which they previously had to drive from Baton Rouge. In addition, Soviet (non-diplomatic) commercial personnel may apply for a closed area exception to visit Houston. If the Soviets are pursuing a liberal policy of closed area exceptions for U.S. businessmen in the USSR, the U.S. will reciprocate. Indeed, more closed area exceptions for Soviet commercial personnel were granted than denied in 1983. The port of Houston is not closed to Soviet citizens.

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On frequent occasions, the Soviet authorities will deny American diplomats, journalists or businessmen permission to travel to open areas in the Soviet Union. When this occurs, the State Department denies a trip of a similar nature by a Soviet to open areas in the United States. The United States operates the system on the basis of reciprocity in an effort to convince the Soviet Union either to abolish travel controls completely, or to apply its system as liberally as possible. The goal is to make travel for Americans who live and work in the Soviet Union -- diplomats, businessmen, journalists, students and scholars and their families -- as easy and broad-ranging as possible.

Thank you for sharing your concerns with us.

Sincerely,

Thomas W. Simons, Jr.
Director
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